

BOOK REVIEW

JOHN DUFFY: *A History of Public Health in New York City, 1866-1966*, New York, N.Y., Russell Sage Foundation, 1974. 712 pp., 12 illustrations, 5 appendices. \$20.00

In 1968 John Duffy, working under a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation and assisted by an able group of associates, published a monumental history of public health in New York City from 1625 to 1866. The present volume, while not so labelled, is in effect a continuation or companion volume covering the 100 years ending in 1966. It was in 1866 that a health agency, the Metropolitan Health Board, had been organized as an instrument of government. In a sense, therefore, this volume represents an account of the problems, accomplishments, successes, and failures of the first full century of governmentally organized public health programs in New York City.

The first few chapters present a chronological account of the early years of the period. These are followed by a series of chapters devoted to specific problems and programs, such as maternal and child health, tuberculosis, and food sanitation. While this produces a certain amount of repetition, it adds to the readability, for each of these chapters provides a comprehensive picture of the program under discussion. Each is highly readable, apart from other chapters. In fact, the entire book is so organized that the potential reader who has but a few minutes at a time can open it at random and find an interesting, well-documented account of some episode or matter of interest. Thus, this book will serve the reader who can only browse as well as the serious student of the history of the public health movement.

The final chapter titled "Three Centuries of Public Health" summarizes both this volume and its earlier companion volume. This admirably written summary will be equally valuable to those who read the two volumes in their entirety and to those who wish only a superficial overview. This chapter alone could stand as required reading for all students in public health who need, but commonly lack, an understanding of how public health has evolved, students ignorant of the past, its problems, its frustrations, and its accomplishments.

While this book is the story of the public health movement in New York City, it is far broader in its message, for with only a change of name it might serve as an account of public health in many communities in the

United States. Here is a well-documented account of the era, the filth of the cities, their slums, the callous neglect of avaricious landlords, their selfish and bitter opposition to improvement in the standards of living. Here is the story of political graft that served to perpetuate filth, poverty, and consequent ill health among the unfortunate masses. Here is also the story of reform movements arising from indignant and outraged public opinion, the demand for correction of conditions that led to ill health and all too frequently to human degradation. Dr. Duffy is quick to give credit to reform leaders and the papers and journals that often spearheaded the programs of correction. He is equally frank in identifying individuals and groups who, through avarice and disregard for human values, were responsible for the conditions leading to ill health.

The earlier volume provided a well-documented but often-lurid account of the ravages of disease during the early years of the growing metropolis. It had been a period of fatalistic acceptance of epidemic disease as an almost inevitable human scourge. Medical thought and research had offered little help to prevent or even minimize the ravages of infectious disease. Mortality rates were high and life expectancy was short. Except for a small group of the affluent, living conditions in the cities were deplorable.

Much of the current volume is a tale of frustrations, community leaders unconcerned with filth and bad housing, and a usually complacent public which periodically was aroused to action by the threat of the return of the devastating plagues of the 18th and early 19th centuries and which slipped back into inaction when the threat failed to materialize. Well-deserved credit is given not only to the prophets of disaster who helped to arouse public opinion but also to the reform leaders who, between the spurts of public concern, clung tenaciously to their goals of a reform of municipal sanitation.

Woven throughout the narrative is a tale of ultimate triumph as the scientific progress and discoveries of later years paved the way for remarkable reductions in the toll of certain diseases and the virtual eradication of others. Here is an inspiring account of administrative pioneering in community-wide application of scientific knowledge for the betterment of mankind.

A vast array of characters crosses the stage of this volume. Their roles are described clearly and due credit or discredit is accorded to them. Unfortunately, their entrances are usually unheralded, their backgrounds or

prior accomplishments not mentioned. The uninformed reader could have profited from a brief introduction of the more significant persons, thus receiving a better understanding of the professional or political background that led to their selection for the positions they held.

Dr. Duffy and his associates have performed a remarkably effective and comprehensive search of source material, providing a well-documented story complete with comprehensive bibliographies for each chapter. So complete are these bibliographies that they alone, irrespective of the narrative, give the volume immense historical value. Fortunately, the narrative is well told, highly readable, and remarkably free of errors or premature conclusions.

In a work of this magnitude and character relying so heavily on associates, however, errors will inevitably occur. The reader will be a bit dismayed to find the discovery of smallpox vaccination attributed (p. 154) to William Jenner, a prominent London physician of the same era as Edward Jenner. Similarly he will regret that the index and, in one place, the text (p. 26) attribute all the many accomplishments of Haven Emerson to his father, Jay Haven Emerson, a not very prominent medical inspector of the 1880s, whose chief contribution to public health was the fathering of a son who became one of the outstanding leaders of the first half of the current century. These errors are not of great consequence in themselves but they do bespeak a word of caution to the reader who may use the book as a starting point for further studies or as an authoritative source of information.

These defects, while unfortunate, do not seriously detract from the immense value of the book. Dr. Duffy and his associates are to be congratulated on presenting a highly readable and superbly documented account of a century of progress in public health as seen in the nation's largest city.

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